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Thai Textiles:
The Changing Roles of Ethnic Textiles in Thailand
Linda McIntosh

Thailand is world renown for its luxurious silk. The weft ikat patterned silk produced in northeast Thailand perhaps represents Thai silk in our minds due to the consumption of this type of silk as souvenirs and as tailored clothing fashioned from old ikat tubeskirts sold in the kingdom and abroad. However, the various ethnic groups living in Thailand produce distinctive textiles using a wide array of techniques, motifs, and materials. A weaver combines of various techniques, motifs, colors and materials to create a textile that is a marker of her identity or of the person she intends the textile for. Although the international community is familiar with some of these textiles through the efforts of development projects marketing hand-woven textile products world-wide and through tourism, very little is known about the identity of a particular hand-woven textile once it leaves the locale of production, the weaver's village.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) is one of the numerous government agencies promoting hand-woven textiles as Thai cultural heritage both locally and internationally as a tradition thriving throughout the kingdom. When targeting the consumer market, there is less emphasis on the textiles as markers of identity of the producer but rather as a representation of Thai culture. Government departments and offices involved in the promotion of hand-woven and leading authorities on the subject refer to hand-woven textiles as Thai textiles. Even when a hand-woven textile reaches the urban market, the merchant is unfamiliar with its origin since the textile may have passed through many hands before arriving at the market and is unable to recognize its ethnicity. The merchant thus presents the textile as a Thai textile.

The term Thai textiles appears to refer to ethnic or hand-woven textiles. Which ethnic textiles are included in Thai textiles' definition? Does Thai in this term refer to a national identity where the textiles woven by all the ethnic groups living within the borders of Thailand are represented by the term, or is it exclusive? Are the textiles of only particular ethnic groups living in Thailand considered to be Thai textiles?

Various Ethnicities of Thailand: The Land of Thais?

Phibul Songkhram renamed the kingdom of Siam to Thailand in 1939 during his first regime (1938-1944) (Reynolds, 1991). The justification for the name change was that the name of the kingdom should represent its citizens. However, Thailand is ethnically diverse, and the kingdom is not heavily populated with ethnic Thais, or the Siamese. The Thais or Siamese have been the rulers of the previous kingdom of central Thailand, Ayutthaya (1350-1767), and are the current ruling elite. The Chakri dynasty (1782- present) consolidated what is now present day Thailand approximately 200 years ago. The ethnic groups found within the borders of Thailand include the Khmer, Malay, Chinese, Hmong, and many Tai speaking groups that the Siamese belong to (National, 1996).

The Tai ethnic groups found in Thailand include the Tai Yuan, Phuan, Lue, Lao, Khrang, Lao Song Dam, and Phu Thai (Gittinger, 1992). Along with the consolidation of territory by the Chakri rulers, the kings populated the kingdom with war captives

primarily from the Lao kingdoms. Many people were forcibly moved mainly to central Thailand to fill the sparsely populated land. Although these Tai groups shared linguistic similarities with the Siamese, there were differences in other cultural aspects such as dress and food. Siamese women wore their hair cropped short and wore *chong kraben* (Thai), wrapped lower garments, while women of other Tai groups grew their hair long and wore *pha sin* (Thai), tubeskirts. The Siamese ate jasmine rice, and Tais ate sticky rice. The textiles and dress differentiated one Tai group from another and from other ethnic groups such as the Khmer (the dominant ethnic group of Cambodia) and the Malay despite contact and trade with others. Each group saw one another as distinct from another group.

Thai Textiles

The use of the term Thai textiles is intriguing in contemporary Thailand due to the diversity of the kingdom's citizens and their textile traditions. It is unlikely that the term Thai textiles refers to ethnic Thai or Siamese textiles since the Siamese ceased textile production more than one hundred years ago. The Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya was a regional trade port importing textiles from India, Cambodia and China for domestic consumption (Ayutthaya, 1998). In order to promote a living textile heritage, Thai authorities must borrow textile traditions from other ethnic groups living in the kingdom. The question is whether the authorities include all ethnic minorities or a select few.

Thailand was at the height of its economic crisis, which began in mid 1997, during 1998. Anti foreign sentiment was strong, and the government encouraged the consumption of Thai products instead of imported goods to boost the economy. One popular slogan was "Thais help Thais, Thais eat Thai food, and Thais use Thai goods." The Thai government also promoted the consumption of Thai textiles by Thais. The Office of the National Cultural Commission (ONCC) Cultural Campaigns against Economic Oppression published a pamphlet with guidelines on how to start a Thai textile collection (Office, 1998). A cultural preservation organization, the Conserve Thai Lifestyle Group, held fashion shows of clothing made from Thai textiles. This group claimed that wearing textiles made from Thai textiles "beat the heat," by stating that natural fibers kept the body cool and if the body was cooler, the use of air conditioning was less (Aree, 1998). Lower usage of air conditioning led to less electricity consumption, "beating the heat" from the cost of imported electricity. The ONCC also sponsored seminars such as the one entitled, "Thai Textiles: The Threads of the Economy," and exhibitions of Thai textiles held throughout Bangkok.

Women: Preserving Culture

Rural women, the primary producers of Thai textiles, are responsible for the continuation of textile production in order for the Thai government to promote textiles as a live tradition. The Thai royal family and the government promote the consumption of textiles by urban women, especially to use as clothing. This ongoing consumption creates a market for Thai textiles, enabling their production.

In order to establish a long term perspective on Thai textiles, this research surveyed four Thai women's magazines for content on Thai textiles since women are the

primary producers and consumers of Thai textiles. Three of the magazines, **Sakul Thai**, **Ying Thai**, and **Khwan Ruean** are similar to **Women's Day** while the fourth, **Phraew**, is the Thai version of **Vogue**. Issues of each magazine circulated in 1978, 1982, 1988, 1992 and 1998 were reviewed for any mention of Thai textiles and how the textiles were presented to the readers. The presentation of the textiles to the modern Thai woman was important since most urban women followed western trends, especially fashion, and viewed hand woven, ethnic textiles as old fashioned and primitive.

The majority of the content on Thai textiles occurred during the 1990s. Issues of **Sakul Thai** and **Ying Thai** mentioned Thai textiles but mainly did so when reporting on the royal family's activities. HR Queen Sirikit is a major promoter of hand woven textiles in the kingdom through the work of her foundation, SUPPORT. 1992 was the year of the queen's fifth cycle or sixtieth birthday. The two magazines mentioned earlier contained fashions made from weft ikat silk from the Tai Lao and Khmer of northeast Thailand. **Sakul Thai** encouraged its readers, "to use Thai textiles to help the rural people and to promote culture such that textiles become part of Thai national heritage," and the magazine also stated that the Tai Lao and Khmer weft ikat textiles were symbols of Thai identity (**Sakul Thai**, 11/92). Textiles of other Tai ethnic minorities were featured as Thai textiles such as the traditionally red shoulder cloth of the Phu Tai, the *phrae wa*, and the discontinuous and continuous supplement patterns of the Tai Yuan, Phuan, Lue, and Lao tubeskirts.

During the height of the economic crisis in 1998, Thai textiles appeared in all four magazines. **Sakul Thai** stated that the periodical would adhere to the Thais Help Thais campaign and only feature clothing made from Thai textiles (**Sakul Thai**, 1/98). The magazine stated that, "to wear Thai textiles is to love the nation, it is Thainess" (**Sakul Thai**, 6/98). **Ying Thai** also featured Thai textile fashions on a regular basis. The other periodicals, **Khwan Ruean** and **Phraew**, occasionally carried items related to Thai textiles especially when local designers included Thai textiles in their collections.

The survey of the four women's magazines demonstrated Thai society expects Thai urban women to preserve Thai textiles or cultural heritage by consuming the textiles primarily as clothing. Rural women also contribute to a national cultural heritage as the producers of Thai textiles. However, the producer inadvertently participates in the transformation of the textile as a marker of her identity into a marker of the consumer's identity, a vague Thai identity.

What are Thai Textiles?

Publications, exhibitions, and seminars indicate that Thai textiles represent textiles of various lowland ethnic minority groups in Thailand. The textiles of the Tai ethnic minorities living in Thailand and the Khmer of the southern portion of northeast Thailand are appropriated into the definition of Thai textiles. Thai society rejects the textiles of the upland minority groups such as the Hmong, Akha, Karen, Mien and Lisu as part of their cultural heritage. Thai society also excludes textiles of other lowland ethnic groups such as the Malay, the majority ethnic group of southern Thailand. This exclusion demonstrates the exclusion of the heritage of culturally dissimilar ethnic groups by Thai society even though these peoples are citizens of the nation of Thailand. Thai society appropriates cultural heritage of their "ethnic kin", the Tai minority groups, and the

Khmer. Although the Khmer belong to a different ethno-linguistic group, Khmer culture has influenced the cultures of the historic kingdoms of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam even though the Khmer were adversaries. The high regard for Khmer material culture allows Thai society to absorb Khmer culture, including textiles, into their own.

The stamps issued in honor of Thai Heritage Conservation Day provide examples of Thai textiles. In Figure 1, four weft ikat patterned silk tubeskirts, *pha sin mii*, were chosen to represent Thai heritage or Thai textiles in 1999. The Thai government and royal family first promoted the weft ikat silks of northeast Thailand as Thai textiles. The tubeskirts depicted in the stamps issued for Thai Heritage Conservation Day 2000 are from other Tai groups living in central and northern Thailand. Weavers from the ethnic groups use similar techniques, motifs and materials to create the tubeskirts, but produce tubeskirts that are distinctive. The Tai Yuan, Phuan and Khrang use discontinuous supplementary weft in the skirt borders for example. There are two examples of Tai Yuan tubeskirts. One is from Chiang Mai province in northern Thailand, and the other is from Ratchaburi province in central Thailand. The Tai Yuan of Ratchaburi originally came from Chiang Saen, which is north of Chiang Mai. Although the structure and motifs of both tubeskirts are alike, the distance between the Tai Yuan groups is evident in the dissimilarities in the tubeskirts. The textiles that are represented in these examples are textiles of the Tai ethnic minorities and the Khmer.

Thai Textiles: The Fabric of Thai Identity?

The Thai elite, the central Thais or Siamese, are unable to promote their own textiles as Thai cultural heritage since production was halted centuries ago. However, ethnic minority groups living within the borders of Thailand continue their weaving traditions to preserve their ethnic identity. In order to promote a viable textile heritage, the Thai elite arbitrarily choose which textile traditions of particular ethnic groups are considered Thai. The term Thai textiles does not apply to the textiles of the nation of Thailand, but identifies what the Thai elite considers worthy to be ethnic Thai despite the original identity of the textile as a marker of the producer's ethnic identity. The adoption of the textiles of Tai and Khmer ethnic minority groups as Thai national heritage and the exclusion of highland minority textiles are examples of this process. The elite exclude the textiles from ethnic groups considered to be inferior in comparison to Thais. Thus, the term Thai textiles identifies textiles produced by certain ethnic minority groups worthy of Thai status.

The Thai elite politically, economically, and socially dominates the ethnic minorities, and *khwan pen thai*, Thainess, reflects this superiority. Recent exhibitions, seminars and publications illustrate the application of Thainess on the categorization of textiles. For example, "Tai Textiles: Thai Heritage," is the title of a seminar held in Lopburi Province, Thailand in 1999, and *Thai Textiles: Tai Textiles*, is a Thai Khadi Institute publication by Suman Thomas in 1998. Another blatant example of the absorption of non Thai or Siamese ethnic textiles into the definition of Thai textiles is the display of textiles and dress of Tai ethnic groups living in Luang Phrabang, Laos, and Chiang Tung, Burma, at the Traditional Thai Textile Fair held in 1998 displayed as Thai.

The definition of Thai textiles is problematic. Thailand attempts to use the term Thai textiles to represent a national textile heritage and as a marker of national identity,

but fails in its arbitrary exclusion of textiles of the ethnic groups considered inferior such as the Hmong or the Karen. Thai textiles symbolize a weak fabric of Thai identity that will quickly unravel if inspected closely.

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Figure 1. Thai stamps depicting Tai Lao and Khmer tubeskirts in honor of Thai Heritage Conservation Day 1999.



Figure 2. Thai stamps depicting tubeskirts of various Tai ethnic groups for Thai Heritage Conservation Day 2000.

